

“Adopted”
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Galatians 4:1-4

I'm interested in what you all learned over Christmas. I'm not so much interested in your plans or resolutions for the coming year as I am interested in what you have taken away, what you value from our most recent Christmas celebration.

So, in the interest of sharing – I'll start.

- Give without any expectation of receiving something in return, whether it be a gift or repayment on a loan – especially where your family and friends are concerned.
- When it comes to family visits – shorter is almost always better.
- No matter how many bathrooms there are in your house, you could always use one more.
- Even if, as a matter of pride, you declare that you can handle the “not-so-enormous” responsibility of taking care of your 6-month-old while your spouse is out of town for five days, you will appreciate it when your family comes to town to help out.
- When your family isn't around on Christmas, no matter how irritating they may be, you still miss them.
- Sitting among friends in the congregation on my daughter's first Christmas morning is something I'll treasure forever.
- It is often very difficult – amid the hustle and bustle leading up to Christmas Day, to appreciate my adoption.

In our passage from Galatians, the Apostle Paul lays out what J. Louis Martyn¹ calls the “*theological center of the letter*, offering the good news that God has sent the Son to rescue them from spiritual slavery and adopt them as God's children.”

What this means is that the way things used to work on earth for God's people are about to change, and it isn't going to be easy. It means that God is choosing not just to redeem the Jews by faith, but also the Gentiles, the whole world. It means that we're going to have to find more room at the inn because God has just upped the guest list. Now hold on a second God (we might say as we wag our finger patronizingly). You can't just open the doors wide, we need some tables set up on the doorstep to check of people's credentials; we need a few bouncers to make sure none of the undeserving get in.

That bouncer – for the longest time was the law. The Jews knew their God and they knew how to be righteous, they had written it down and lived under it as slaves live under their masters. And so their argument to the church in Galatia makes a lot of sense. If you want to be a part of God's kingdom, then you have to follow the same rules that we've been following for centuries.

Paul couldn't disagree more! He rails on through this whole letter that Christ is the only ruler by which we need to measure our acceptance into God's grace.

Now look – we already know this, in fact, it's so simple that we humans are constantly finding ways to complicate the issue. Deciding for ourselves based on all manner of things what it is that God really expects of us. It's too simple to say that God wants us to love him and love others. What does that really mean? Not just for us individually, but what about corporately and nationally and congregationally.

- It's easy to say if we see someone hungry, we should feed him or her, but it's another thing entirely to go out and find hungry people to feed.
- It's one thing to say as a nation we are entitled to freedom of religion, but it's quite another when that means that our child is exposed at school to religious values with which we disagree.
- It's one thing to be willing to forgive our debts, it's quite another when we know that the person indebted to us isn't making what we would consider the best decisions with the money we so graciously gave.

This is the difference between the ways of the world, our life under the law and the rule of Jesus Christ and God's undeserved grace. We will always struggle to forgive our family members the money they never paid us back, but Jesus would call it selfish to ever want it back in the first place.

Paul is talking in Galatians to a group of people – new followers of Christ, who are hearing two competing messages. They hear from one group that without following all of the old rules they will never be full members of this new kingdom that Christ has spoken of.

On the other hand, Paul is trying to explain to them that not only do they not need to follow the old rules to be a part of the club, but that the folks already in the club have the same membership status as the rookies. Of course, Paul and Jesus before him have a much more difficult argument. They are trying to say that seniority, privilege, experience, wisdom don't matter in God's kingdom. Meanwhile, the other argument, by human standards is as plain as the nose on your face. Of course the proven veteran quarterback gets a spot on the team before the fresh-out-of-college place kicker. That's the way of the world after all. We are products of this world, our natural parents are mortality and disobedience and with a family like, how can we ever expect to be a part of God's kingdom? This is the beauty of God's grace for all people – Christ in the fullness of time showed up to redeem humanity. Not just the parts of humanity that followed the rules of the world, but all people who desired to love as Christ had shown.

In fact, that very phrase, the ways of the world are what Paul says Jesus has come to counteract. Even the Law, given to Moses and passed on is one of the ways of the world. Martin Luther² says:

“It is truly amazing that the Law had the effrontery to turn upon its divine Author, and that without a show of right. For its insolence the Law in turn was arraigned before the judgment seat of God and condemned.”

In other words, Jesus, blameless before the law usurps the law and becomes the new standard by which we should measure ourselves. We shouldn't be measuring ourselves by Presbyterian standards or by American standards or even by Shandon standards. Think of it

like the chart at the fair. You know the one; it says, “You must be this tall to ride this ride.” Instead of looking for ways to raise the bar, Jesus comes in and puts the bar on the floor and welcomes everyone who is hungry to come and eat.

Barbara Kingsolver tells this story in her book “The Bean Trees.” The setting is an eclectic thanksgiving dinner with a diverse crowd.

Turtle, let me tell you a story, Esteban said. “If you go to visit hell, you will see a room like this kitchen. There is a pot of delicious stew on the table, with the most delicate aroma you can imagine. All around, people sit, like us. Only they are dying of starvation. They are gibbering and jabbering ... but they cannot get a bite of this wonderful stew God has made for them. Now why is that?”

“Because they’re choking? For all eternity?” someone asks.

“No, good guess, but no. They are starving because they only have spoons with very long handles. As long as [a mop handle]. With these ridiculous, terrible spoons, the people in hell can reach into the pot but they cannot put the food in their mouths. Oh, how hungry they are! Oh, how they swear and curse each other! Now, you can go and visit heaven. What? You see a room just like the first one, the same table, the same pot of stew, the same spoons as long as a sponge mop. But these people are happy and well-fed.”

“Real fat, or do you mean just well-fed? Someone else asks.

“Just well-fed. Perfectly, magnificently well-fed, and very happy. Why do you think?” He then pinched up a chunk of pineapple in his chopsticks, neat as you please, and reached all the way across the table to offer it to Turtle. She took it like a newborn bird.³

Let us pray. God grant that in this New Year we might recognize and appreciate not only our adoption into your loving arms, help us to appreciate the adoption of our friends, neighbors and enemies as well.

1 Galatians 4:4-7: Exegetical Perspective by Allen R. Hilton. Feasting on the Word Commentary Series: Year B, Volume 1. Edited by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) p.159.'

2 Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians (1535) by Martin Luther. Translated by Theodore Graebner (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1949) Chapter 4, pp. 150-172. <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/gal/web/gal4-01.html>

3 The Bean Trees by Barbara Kingsolver. (New York, New York: Harper Collins, 1988) Chapter 7: How They Eat In Heaven, pp.144-145.